

Stanford | Continuing Studies

Course Title: Writing the Memoir: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Course Code: CNF 09

Instructor: John W. Evans

Course Summary:

My goal for your learning in this class is that you walk out of our last session having done the following:

1. Written about your own life in a meaningful way.
2. Learned many strategies for writing about personal experience.
3. Set goals and taken risks regarding your writing.
4. Written and received peer feedback only on one short essay assignment.
5. Planned, written, received peer and instructor feedback on, and presented to the class a memoir chapter or memoir essay.
6. Practiced giving and receiving helpful individual and workshop peer feedback.

Grade Options and Requirements:

- No Grade Requested (NGR): Course Work must be completed to receive credit.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC): Course Work must be completed to receive credit.
- Letter Grade (A, B, C, D, No Pass): Work assigned by the instructor, as follows, will determine a student's grade:
 - Class Participation (50%)
 - Writing Assignments (50%)

**Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

Email Consent:

If you have not done so already, please reply to my earlier email request to give your consent to send and receive emails directly via the "To" email field. Doing so will help immensely with distributing course readings and materials, student work, and the class summary emails (see below).

Course Materials:

I will send as .PDF attachments the materials for use a day or two before each class meets. You can either print these materials in advance or save/access them on a device, but it is your responsibility to have them ready. Doing so will allow for the most accessibility. You only need to have these materials ready to use during class. Please do not work ahead. No advanced work is required.

Class Summary Emails:

I will send out, via email, class summaries following each class, usually within 24 hours of our meeting. If you are uncomfortable sharing your email address with the class, then you may opt out of the email summaries. Please let me know directly via email if you would like me to not share your email address with the class.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
365 Lasuen St., Stanford, CA 94305
continuingstudies@stanford.edu
650-725-2650

Course Readings:

There are no textbooks to purchase for this course. I will distribute course readings as PDF attachments to the class summary emails.

Distributing Work to Each Other:

You will distribute by email to the whole class on the due dates your Short Essay and Memoir/Essay. You will send these in .PDF format during class time. I will make time in class for you to distribute your work. Doing so will mimic “passing out” your essays in person, and give us a chance to double-check that we receive everyone’s work. You can create .PDF files very easily from MSWord, Pages, Google Docs, etc.

Course Expectations (% of Grade, if grade option selected):

Class Participation (50%): A workshop succeeds when its participants are punctual, engaged, thoughtful, and intellectually invested in each other’s growth and success. Please arrive to each class on time, in possession of the course materials, having completed the assigned work, and ready to make regular contributions to the class conversation. Please read each other’s work carefully in preparation for workshop. And, please be thoughtful about sharing the discussion space in the workshop.

Writing Assignments (50%): You should expect to write at the beginning of every class; a notebook or journal will be helpful. You will develop and present for workshop one (1) Short Essay and one (1) longer Memoir/Essay piece. You will write a brief critique for each of your colleague’s shorter exercises. You will write a longer critique of each of your colleagues’ longer essays. You will, from time to time, workshop each other’s in-class writing work (as you choose to do so). Please keep in mind that all of your critiques will primarily be a resource for revision.

Coursework Formatting:

Please type all assignments in a 12-point legible font. Double-space your prose. Use page numbers. All work must be titled.

Attendance and Missed Work:

If you miss class, for any reason, please follow-up with a colleague regarding what you missed and arrange any missed work. Please come prepared to participate in the next class. Missed workshops will not be made up at a later date due to the limited schedule of the term and our larger class size.

Email Updates:

I will send out, via email, class summaries following each class, usually within 24 hours of our meeting. Please let me know directly via email if you would like me to not share your email address with the class.

Paperwork:

Consider using a file folder or binder to keep track of everything “offline.” Do not discard any of your work during the quarter.

The Digital Age:

There is no asynchronous option for this course. Class will only meet live and during the class period. You must attend the full class period with your video on during instructional time.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

*(please note the due dates for these assignments are listed on the Calendar, p. 6.
I may choose to modify or omit the following, as our progress permits)*

First Day Assignment (Week 1). Access via enrollment confirmation email.

Short Essay (Week 2; 300-500 words). Write about a secret, lie, or mystery related to a person or place you know well. What about this secret interests or troubles you? Include at least one scene in the essay. Some ideas: an inconsistency in family history, a person or object gone missing, a work colleague who “turned” on you or on whom you “turned,” a time you lied to someone, a time when someone lied to you, an unusual custom or belief in the place where you grew up.

Sketch of Memoir Essay or Chapter (Week 4). Write a short narrative sketch OR make an artistic outline of the Memoir Essay or Chapter that you want to write for this class. Use a format that you will find useful for organizing your thinking about and planning for the Essay/Chapter. Brainstorm some research that you might conduct.

OPTIONAL Long Essay Excerpt Workshop (Week 5): If you would like to do so, please share a short excerpt (700 words max.) from the working draft of your Long Essay. Include two specific questions written at the bottom of the excerpt, soliciting helpful feedback from the class.

Memoir Essay or Chapter (Weeks 6-9). Write a 7-12 page (3,000 words max.) memoir essay or chapter on any subject, in any style. It may expand upon our daily writing activities, imitate the writers we are reading, come from your personal papers/journal, and/or respond to whatever attracts your fancy. The only stipulation is that you actively do some research to generate material, and include that research in your essay. Here are some successful examples taken from previous Writing the Memoir classes:

- A student wrote about her husband’s sudden death, and the period of grief and reflection that followed in the days before the funeral.
- A student wrote about her experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1960s.
- A student adapted her Short Essay into a personal history of her childhood in Paris and sudden move to California, and how anxiety has manifested as lifelong physical symptoms.
- A student wrote about her experience of attending an open house for a private high school on the Peninsula, contrasted with the relative poverty she grew up in during the 1970s.
- A student wrote a moving portrait of his grandmother, contrasting his memories of her in childhood with his memories now in middle-age.

The Process Letter (Weeks 6-9; stapled at end of your Memoir Essay or Chapter). When you have finished writing the Essay/Chapter that you will workshop in class, write a one-page process letter answering the following questions. The purpose of the Process Letter is to orient your colleagues to those areas which you feel require the most attention in discussion and revision. What were your intentions when you wrote this piece? What parts do you think were the most successful? What parts were frustrating to write or need more work? Please also highlight any areas that you feel should or should not be especially addressed or avoided in our feedback.

Feedback Letters (Weeks 7-10; 1/2 to 1 page, single-spaced, 1 per colleague). You will read everyone's Essay/Chapter assignments. However, you will respond with a letter of written feedback for only the other authors on your chosen due date¹. You will send the Feedback Letter directly to the author, via email. These will not be graded individually, but the work should conform to the standards of the class. I will spot-check them with individual authors. The perspective and content should follow the guidelines set out in *The Creative Nonfiction Workshop* (p. 6). If you write all of these, provide serious and considerate feedback, and turn them in on time, you will receive full credit for this writing assignment.

¹ This is a slight change in course policy from previous terms. Continuing Studies has increased class minimum size, and asking you all to write twenty-five feedback letters each seems excessive to me. Hence this change.

**COURSE CALENDAR:
WORKSHOP SCHEDULE & DUE DATES**

*(subject to change and supplement, as our progress requires;
"Readings" will be distributed by handout during the previous class)*

Week 1 (3/30): Course Introductions; The 14-Century Historical "Arc" of The Personal Memoir.

First Assignment Due (see confirmation email). Readings (distributed in class): Shonagon, Brainard, Hughes, Jamison, Strayed.

Week 2 (4/6): The Memoir as a Record of Loss and Place.

Readings (via handouts): Augustine, Sedaris, Xun, Ashe.

Short Essay due.

Week 3 (4/13): The Memoir as a Record of Experience and Transformation.

Readings (via handouts): Carver, Kooser, Fisher, Carson.

Short Essay small group workshop.

Week 4 (4/20): The Open Week.

We will take this week to revisit course concepts to date, talk about the memoir form generally, and do some in-class writing activities. There are no readings for this week.

Sketch due with copies for All.

Sketch Workshop (no prepared work).

Week 5 (4/27): The Memoir as a Record of Light and Dark.

Readings (via handouts): Woolf, Beard, Gluck.

Optional Long Essay Excerpt Workshop.

Sign Up for Due Dates of Memoir Essay/Chapter.

Week 6 (5/4): The Memoir as a Record of Pain and Withstanding.

Readings (via handouts): Solomon, T. O'Brien, H. O'Brien, D'Ambrosio.

Memoir Essay/Chapters due in class from Students #1-6 on FRI 10/30.

Week 7 (5/11): Workshops.

Quarter Project Workshops for Students #1-6.

Memoir Essay/Chapters due in class from Students #7-12 on FRI 11/6.

Week 8 (5/18): Workshops.

Quarter Project Workshops for Students #7-12.

Memoir Essay/Chapters due in class from Students #13-18 on FRI 11/13.

Week 9 (5/25): Workshops.

Quarter Project Workshops for Students #13-18.

Memoir Essay/Chapters due in class from Students #19-24 on FRI 11/20.

Week 10 (6/1): Workshops.

Quarter Project Workshops for Students #19-24.

THE MEMOIR WORKSHOP: A REFRESHER

While we cannot anticipate every success and frustration, we can do our best to anticipate and avoid many of the most common workshop pitfalls. With that in mind, I propose some workshop guidelines for the quarter.

- 1. Due Work.** Your essays are due according to the schedule.
- 2. Reading.** Read each essay before you come to class on the day that it is due to be work-shopped. If possible, read each essay twice. Remember that your ideas about and understanding of the essay will likely change with successive readings.
- 3. Comments [Logistics].** You will write endnotes for the Short Essay assignments by the authors in your small group. Endnotes express whole-essay praise, questions, and wondering (3-5 total sentences). You will send your Endnotes directly to the author via email after the Short Essay workshop.
- 4. Comments [Quality].** Try to use the course terminology in some of your Comments. Consider your feedback an opportunity to practice and demonstrate your critical mastery. Your comments will be a resource for revision.
- 5. Curiosity > Authority.** Read and write your Comments from a place of curiosity rather than authority. Assume that every line, sentence, paragraph, section, and word is chosen with intention and skill. Work to understand the choices that are made in the essay.
- 6. Avoid Benign Neglect.** Do not decide to “just love everything” about an essay. Choose your praise carefully and express it well.
- 7. Suggestions.** It’s fine to offer suggestions for revision. When you do so, give a clear and concise context for the suggestion. Do not simply make a change to the writing without explanation. The author should understand clearly why you have recommended a revision.
- 8. Wingdings.** Do not use symbols, emoticons, smiley faces, or any other graphic in your feedback.
- 9. Reading Your Essay Out-Loud.** Before it is work-shopped, a passage from each essay will be read out-loud. When your essay is work-shopped, you may either read the passage out-loud or ask someone else to read it out-loud.
- 10. Prefaces and Questions.** There is no need to make pre-workshop comments via email or during the class meeting. At the end of your workshop, you will have the chance to clarify, ask questions, and/or respond.
- 11. Keep It On The Page.** During discussion, locate your comments with references to specific moments in the essay that occur on the page. Do not infer intention or interpretation. Do not psychoanalyze.
- 12. Avoid Clustering.** There are many different kinds of essays and writers. No doubt, aesthetic preferences will converge and diverge as the quarter progresses. Consider these fluctuations an opportunity to understand better unfamiliar or unattractive ideas about writing, reading, and literature. Use criticism/ideology to clarify your understanding of an essay—not vice-versa.
- 13. Easter Island and Authority.** While your essay is being work-shopped, avoid making faces.
- 14. Safe Space.** Respect the safe space we create as we work together. Seek me out if you feel it has been violated.

FURTHER READING LIST

Anthologies, Craft Books, & Books on Memoir Writing by Prose Writers

Writing the Memoir, Judith Barrington
The Situation and the Story, Vivian Gornick
Inventing the Truth, Edited by William Zinsser
On Writing: A Memoir of Craft, Stephen King
Tell It Slant, (recommended for exercises), Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paolo
Naming the World: And Other Exercises for the Creative Writer, Bret Anthony Johnston
Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them, Francine Prose
Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, Anne Lamott
Burning Down The House, Charles Baxter
Narrative Design, Madison Smartt Bell
Lit From Within: Contemporary Masters on the Art and Craft of Writing, Kevin Haworth and Dinty Moore
One Writer's Story, Welty, Eudora
How to Write: Advice and Reflections, Richard Rhodes
The Art of the Personal Essay, Philip Lopate
The Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Nonfiction, Michael Marton
The Making of a Story: A Norton Anthology of Prose, Alice LaPlante

Some Memoirs I Love

The Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion
Testament of Youth, Vera Brittain
Goodbye to All That, Robert Graves
Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, Mary McCarthy
The Glass Castle: A Memoir, Jeanette Walls
H Is For Hawk, Helen Macdonald
Days of Grace, Arthur Ashe with Arnold Rampersad
Self-Consciousness, John Updike
Twentieth Century Pleasures, Robert Hass
Personal History, Katherine Graham
Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, Alison Bechdel (a memoir in comics)
A Soldier's Heart, Elizabeth Samet
Here If You Need Me, Kate Braestrup
Object Lessons, Eavan Boland
Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders, Lawrence Weschler
Notes from No Man's Land, Eula Biss
Confessions, Augustine
Confessions, Rousseau
The Blessing: A Memoir, Gregory Orr
In Pharaoh's Army, Tobias Wolff
I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou
Angela's Ashes, Frank McCourt
Catfish and Mandala, Andrew Pham
Art Objects, Jeanette Winterson
The Astronomical Me, MFK Fisher
Always Running, Luis Rodriguez

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